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“Learning to like learning”: an appreciative inquiry into emotions in education

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Abstract Various learning philosophies, such as humanistic, constructivist, and socio-cultural approaches, have accentuated the importance of emotion in learning. In this article, we reviewed these approaches and explored the affective dimensions of learning. We conducted focus group and individual interviews with a group of female students in the humanities enrolled in an academic facilitation programme employing a student-centred, experiential, and collaborative learning approach. Through a process of appreciative inquiry, we discovered which learning techniques, experiences, and educational climates encouraged learning. Students reported that a learning climate that elicits positive emotional experiences promoted increased personal involvement in learning, broadened thought processes and actions, and resulted in change and development on emotional, cognitive, and behavioural levels. These findings formed a basis for suggesting learning principles / criteria for a curriculum that has the promise to offer students constructive learning experiences towards deeper and more holistic learning. These principles include the importance of creating a safe learning environment, enhancing students’ autonomy and involvement in the learning process, and providing authentic and intrinsically valuable learning experiences.

Keywords Emotion in learning · Constructivism · Experiential learning · Socio-cultural theories · Student-centred learning

1 Introduction

When we peer into the worlds and experiences of students in higher education, we obtain but a glimpse of the dynamics of their lived realities. Young adult students are

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undeniably involved in complex processes of learning and development. This involves increased cognitive complexity and progressive neuro-biological maturation which leads to changes in thinking processes and the questioning of pre-existing knowledge. Students also experience a heightened sense of identity, an expanding strive towards independence, while simultaneously seeking more mature and intimate relationships. The complex and continuous interplay between the intellectual and the emotional should also be acknowledged in students' realities. Considering these comprehensive conditions, the application of a multifaceted perspective is needed to make sense of students' subjective experiences of valuable learning and teaching events.

In this article, acknowledging the intricate processes involved in learning and development, we employed various distinct, but complementary theoretical perspectives in exploring the learning processes of a group of students. The article starts by explicating the meta-perspectives of humanism and constructivism, both from a cognitive and social learning point of view. These perspectives are explored through the work of [Rogers \(1969\)](#) [Piaget \(1976\)](#), [Dewey \(1897, 1963\)](#), [Kolb \(1984\)](#), [Kolb and Kolb \(2005\)](#), [Vygotsky \(1930/1998\)](#), and others. This then forms the foundation for an informed argument regarding the role of emotion in the learning process.

2 Humanist perspectives on learning: a student-centred approach

The student- or learner-centred approach has its ontological foundations in the humanistic perspective of development. Humanists embrace the importance of holistic development, self-directed learning, and self-actualization through learning. Furthermore, humanists place high value on the role of the affective domain (including self-concept, self-esteem, motivation, and emotional satisfaction) in learning ([Marquardt and Waddill 2004](#); [Qi 2012](#); [Rogers 1961](#)). Both affective and cognitive needs are very important in humanistic teaching, and the goal is to develop self-actualized learners in a cooperative and supportive environment. Empathy, unconditional positive regard, genuineness, non-directivity, and the encouragement of critical thinking is regarded as crucial components of the learning process ([Cornelius-White 2007](#)).

The main objectives of a student-centred approach include the recognition of the importance of learner autonomy where personal growth and change of students are prioritized ([Rogers 1983](#)). [Rogers \(1969\)](#), one of the most important contributors to the development of student-centred approaches, postulated that all humans have a natural propensity or eagerness to learn. [Deboer \(2002, p. 407\)](#) agreed and emphasized that student-centred teaching and learning allow the use of “the natural energy of students to create meaning for themselves and it makes learning more authentic, enjoyable, and intrinsically motivating”.

With this notion, the role of the teacher is redefined as a facilitator who should, instead of directly intervening, focus on creating an enabling environment to facilitate the natural development of the learner. This can be accomplished through establishing an atmosphere in which learners feel comfortable to consider new ideas and are not threatened by interference. When students feel safe, they are more apt to demonstrate creativity, intellectual curiosity, and higher-level thinking ([Cornelius-White 2007](#)). [Qi \(2012\)](#) supported these ideas and proposed that effective education should

promote learners' desire to learn (be interested), involve learners in the decision-making processes of learning (ownership), and provide opportunities to evaluate themselves. Learners should feel secure in a non-threatening and non-judgmental learning environment, in which there is attention to both intellectual and emotional needs. Through this, a positive climate is created where the emotional and intellectual components of learning are balanced.

3 Constructivist and experiential views on learning

Constructivists believe that learning is the meaning-making process of discovering complex information and transforming this information into internal constructions of reality (Marquardt and Waddill 2004; Qi 2012). According to constructivist theorists (Dewey 1897, 1963; Kolb 1984; Kolb and Kolb 2005; Piaget 1976), learning is a multifaceted process that involves the whole person and includes different states of thinking, feeling, behaving, and perceiving.

Piaget (1976) proposed a constructivist perspective on learning and believed that knowledge is neither static nor given to passive observers, but constructive in its origin and development. That is, not only do individuals discover reality, but they also construct or invent an understanding of reality in relation to pre-existing cognitive structures and expectations. Piaget posed that experience is the *sine qua non* of learning and believed that, in order to know something, it must be acted upon (Piaget 1976). Dewey, also known as a constructive and progressive educator, believed that learners should be active in seeking purpose, that learner participation is crucial in the learning process, that democratic education is needed and that personal meaning and affect are important contributors to a successful learning experience (Dewey 1897, 1963). Individuals are more likely to assimilate and accommodate new information into existing knowledge structures when they judge a learning opportunity and experience as being valuable (Dewey 1897, 1963).

Building on the work of Piaget and Dewey, Kolb (1984) defined learning as the process whereby the transformation of experience leads to the creation of knowledge—a continuous process of learning and relearning. Students need to be actively and directly involved in a cyclical learning process progressing through various stages (Kolb 1984; Kreber 2001). Kolb (1984) described four distinct dimensions (stages) through which individuals actively and directly transform experiences into knowledge. Individuals may create new knowledge through the feelings, intuitions, implied meanings, and creative aspects resulting from the event (concrete experience), or through engaging in theoretical interpretations and the development of representational schemas of the event (abstract conceptualization). Also, Kolb explains that an individual may learn through an internal reflection (reflective observation) and active involvement in the experience (active experimentation). An individual's acquisition of knowledge depends on the extent with which an individual experiences an event on these four dimensions. Learning occurs when students attempt to resolve differences, conflict, and opposing ideas (called dialectical perturbation or disequilibrium) through an oscillation among reflection, action, feeling, and thinking modes (Dewey 1897, 1963; Kolb 1984).

4 Socio-cultural learning theories in a collaborative learning environment

Students are complex beings with intricate and powerful relations with their learning and social environments (Ingleton 1999).

Social learning theorists focus on the social context of the learning process—how people learn through interacting with and observing others. Vygotsky (2004) emphasized the social nature of learning and that social transactions are a fundamental vehicle for education. This is supported by feminist epistemologies viewing learning as a social practice, embedded in the participation in communities of practice. In the shift towards the collective construction of knowledge, the teacher is decentred, the student's voice is promoted, the search for knowledge becomes more dialogic, and the relationship between student and teacher becomes reciprocal (Belenky et al. 1997; Fear et al. 2002).

Vygotsky considered development to be the result of various interactions between an individual and others (Jennings and Di 1996; Nussbaum et al. 2008). He emphasized that these social interactions and experiences facilitate the construction of meaning and learning (McLeod 2007; Naudé and Bezuidenhout 2013). Vygotsky stated that, when individuals think and talk about their experiences, especially with a 'knowledgeable or skilful other', they actively engage in a process of meaning making and, ultimately, learning. Furthermore, Vygotsky described these social interactions as collaborative or cooperative in nature, which involves a dialectical and cognitive mode of relating to social experiences (McLeod 2007). In a higher education learning environment, this may include various interactions amongst students and a teacher wherein students employ meta-cognitive skills (i.e. thinking about their thinking) and communicate these internalized concepts and ideas through the use of language (Wang 2007).

According to Vygotsky, the development of higher mental functions is dependent on interactions between the environment wherein learning occurs and the biological qualities of the organism (Vygotsky 1930/1998; Harland 2003; Hofstetter and Schneuwly 2009). The gap between an individual's current or actual development and their potential development is described as the zone of proximal development (ZPD; Vygotsky 1930/1998, 1978). Individuals' developmental movement in the direction of their potential development level, depend on the type of learning events that ensue within the ZPD. Movement towards potential development is stimulated by learning events that involve guidance and support (scaffolding) and are characterized by peer-interaction and collaboration (McLeod 2007). Scaffolding and interaction facilitate self-reliance and knowledge, problem solving, the establishment of meta-cognitive faculties and knowledge transmission (Harland 2003; McLeod 2007; Wang 2007).

5 The role of emotion in the learning process

There is growing recognition of the central role of emotion in the learning process. According to Ingleton (1999), emotion governs the level of activity in learning because it, emotion, shapes and is shaped by social relations, self esteem, and identity. Emotion can permeate the educational experience in a variety of ways and, therefore, play a complex and dynamic role in shaping the learning experience. For example, in their

research, [Trigwell et al. \(2012\)](#) found a correlation between positive emotions, deeper learning approaches, and higher achievement scores.

There are various ways to conceptualize emotion in the learning process and it is important to recognize that the way in which emotion is viewed may shape research findings ([Linnenbrink-Garcia et al. 2011](#)). [Linnenbrink-Garcia and Pekrun \(2011\)](#) referred to the importance of conceptual clarity when researching emotion—to consider how to define emotion, how the definition aligns with theoretical perspectives, and how to assess emotion. Some studies focus on physiological and neurological aspects of emotion, some on positive and negative aspects, short or long term implications, or state versus trait aspects ([Linnenbrink-Garcia and Pekrun 2011](#)). [Sikhwari \(2007\)](#) for example used concepts such as self concept, motivation, and attitude when researching the role of emotion in the learning process, while [Ainley and Ainley \(2011\)](#) referred to the importance of personal value, enjoyment, and interest. [Ingleton \(1999\)](#) investigated shame and pride as emotions influencing social learning relationships.

The broaden-and-build theory posits that positive emotions broaden the student's thought-action repertoire—interest and enjoyment can facilitate engagement in class activities, as well as deeper exploration of learning material. This broader mindset builds the student's intellectual resources which, in turn, enhances academic coping ([Fredrickson 2001](#); [Fredrickson and Branigan 2005](#); [Fredrickson and Joiner 2002](#)). Fredrickson emphasized that, while negative emotions narrow focus and prepare for defense actions, positive emotions expand focus. She refers specifically to the importance of joy and playfulness in collaboration with exploratory interest.

[Pekrun et al. \(2011\)](#) employed the control value theory, which is rooted in expectancy value approaches and attributional theories. In the control value theory, emotions are directly related to achievement and incorporate affective, cognitive, motivational, and physiological psychological processes. [Pekrun et al. \(2011\)](#) proposed a two dimensional taxonomy that incorporates valence (e.g. positive versus negative emotions) and activation (e.g. activating versus deactivating emotions such as hope versus hopelessness). The aspects of control and subjective value are also considered, postulating that controllable and valuable activities instigate positive affect. According to the control value theory, achievement emotions affect and are affected by learning, as well as by intrinsic motivation (e.g. curiosity) and extrinsic motivation (e.g. attaining positive outcomes, such as good marks). [Dettmers et al. \(2011\)](#) built on the control value theory and proposed that good quality instruction facilitates high control and value and thus leads to pleasant achievement emotions. They thus suggest the use of an autonomy-supportive learning environment.

Related to this approach, [Linnenbrink-Garcia et al. \(2011\)](#) were of the opinion that the conceptualization of learning engagement should be extended beyond cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects to also include the reciprocal relationship between emotions and social behavioral engagement. They refer to the importance of learning from participating students and the importance of quality group interactions and collaborations. They highlight the dynamic and cyclical relationship between affect and social behavioral engagement.

It is thus clear that there is currently more interest in and support for the central role of emotion in the academic environment and already more insight into the role of

emotions in students' academic engagement (Ainley and Ainley 2011; Linnenbrink-Garcia et al. 2011). Still, emotion is seen as the neglected factor in learning and its role is still largely unexamined, probably due to the dualism between thinking and feeling, where reason and cognition is regarded as dominating (Ingleton 1999). Research in the field is still underdeveloped and inconclusive. Trigwell et al. (2012) mentioned that most research focuses on cognitive rather than emotional processes in learning, and, where emotion is incorporated into research studies, the research mostly focuses on a small range of emotions. There is thus a call for more systematic, empirically sound, and theoretically grounded research (Linnenbrink-Garcia and Pekrun 2011), for qualitative research studies regarding the role of emotion in the learning process (Trigwell et al. 2012) and for research that explores the relation between affect and engagement, the dynamic and reciprocal processes that shape socialization processes (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al. 2011). This study thus aimed to explore and describe the affective dimensions of learning and the value it has in a specific learning context, namely the Academic Facilitation programme of the Faculty of the Humanities at the University of the Free State, South Africa.

6 The context of this study

The University of the Free State (UFS), the only residential university situated in the central region of South Africa, is a multicultural, parallel-medium institution with instruction in English and Afrikaans, which offers a variety of undergraduate and post-graduate programmes in seven faculties to more than 33,000 students. Being a learning organization that is committed to becoming a democratic and multicultural community, the UFS faces the challenge of equatibility—to be responsive to market needs and to provide access with success to a diverse student population. Cognisant of the increasing epistemological gap (related to the differences in processes of knowledge construction) between schooling and higher education (Boughey 2002, 2003), the UFS responds to the challenge to provide underprepared students with the competencies needed to cope with higher education challenges through the incorporation of a variety of bridging, extended, support, and tutorial programmes. One of these programmes, the Academic Facilitation project was launched by the Faculty of the Humanities to provide academic scaffolding to students in extended programmes (Naudé and Bezuidenhout 2013).

Following an educational philosophy based on experiential learning (Kolb 1984), social constructivism, and cooperative learning (Bruner 1985, 1996; Vygotsky 1962; 1986), students in the academic facilitation programme attend weekly small-group activity-based sessions where disciplinary content (such as psychology and sociology) are integrated with developmental competencies (such as generic competencies for lifelong learning, language for academic purposes, and mathematical literacy). These interactive small-group facilitated sessions deviate greatly from the mainstream lectures where large classes of students are accommodated in weekly discipline-oriented lectures. Academic facilitation sessions are constructed in a way that promotes collaborative and experience-based learning focussing on the facilitation of group-based activities and interactions. During facilitation, learners are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning and have to provide input for learning by

sharing their insights and experiences. The assumption is that these interactions will contribute to a safe and authentic learning environment where learners are challenged to become independent lifelong learners (Naudé and Bezuidenhout 2013).

7 Research method

The philosophical stance that underpinned the methodological processes of data gathering and analyses in this research study was that of appreciative inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987). We deemed this stance applicable to the overarching aim of the research, which focussed on the affective value of learning. It furthermore articulates well with humanistic perspectives, holistic learning, and the value of affect and positive experiences.

The AI perspective begins with the exploration of human strengths and positive individual qualities, and how these relate to an individual's experiences, constructions of meaning, and overall functioning and development (Liebling et al. 1999). Furthermore, AI is used to investigate and identify those qualities that "give life and strength and possibility to a living system" (Cooperrider and Avital 2004, p. xii). Appreciation involves identifying what individuals consider to be valuable experiences, which events constructively contributed to their development and the maintenance of a positive stance in their day-to-day living (Cooperrider and Avital 2004). Inquiry, as Cooperrider and Avital (2004) stated, involves exploration processes through which experiences and knowledge are organized and connected in order to make sense of the world.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) consists of four phases (the 4-D cycle), namely discovery, dreaming, design, and destiny (Carter et al. 2007). The discovery phase allows participants to recall and discuss which aspects of a specific experience they enjoyed and valued. This includes the identification of the events, activities, and interactions that contributed to participants' overall experience. The dreaming phase entails the use of provocative propositions, and aims to elicit a response, stimulate discussion, and promote further momentum in the inquiry. The propositions developed during the dreaming phase are incorporated into the design phase. These propositions are prioritized and grounded in the reality of what have already been experienced and what may be experienced. The destiny phase consists of developing and implementing strategies based on what individuals identified as valuable. These four phases informed the current research process in the sense that it sensitized the researchers towards the statement of the aims, the formulation of the interview questions and the systemic analysis of the data. The data gathering procedures focussed mainly on discovering and dreaming, while, through the data analysis, discussion, and conclusion, the designing and destiny phases were addressed.

The aim of this research study was to determine the affective value of students' learning experiences. In addition, this study aimed to explore how students' experiences of positive affect contributed to their construction of meaning, how this resulted in positive behavioural, cognitive, and emotional changes, and ultimately enhanced the overall learning and developmental experience.

We followed a qualitative approach to gain a detailed understanding of students' most valued learning experiences. Through purposive sampling for representativeness (Teddlie and Yu 2007) students were identified and given the opportunity to voluntarily

attend a focus group or an individual interview. All participants were female students in the humanities enrolled in the academic facilitation programme. The interview questions were designed to elicit elaborative narratives and to facilitate qualitative analysis based on the principles of AI (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987). We recorded the focus group and individual conversations, transcribed these records verbatim, and reviewed the texts immediately after the engagements.

Guided by the research question and sensitized by the principles of AI, we conducted data analysis following an inductive process of thematic analysis where data was read and reread, coded and categorized in themes. This allowed for in-depth and direct data examination and consideration of the different meanings of participants' experiences from which emerging patterns and themes could be generated (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006).

Using the principles and phases of AI as a well recognized research approach and following the guidelines for the successful use of AI, such as those proposed by Williams and Haizlip (2013), we ensured a systematic decision making process. Although we don't claim the absence of researcher bias and subjectivity, we actively practiced self-reflexivity throughout the process, through both individual and collaborative reflective sessions (Pezalla et al. 2012). Furthermore, to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, we applied the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Patton 2002). This was achieved through thorough theoretical triangulation, audit recordings and verbatim transcriptions, clear audit trails, detailed descriptions of the context, considerable engagement with participants, and direct quotations to support findings. We regard the diversity of the three primary researchers (in terms of gender, approach, and educational experience) as a strength since our diverse opinions complemented each other and provided for investigator triangulation.

The necessary ethical approval and permission for the study were obtained from the Dean of Students at the UFS. Informed consent was obtained from all research participants. Participants could withdraw from the research at free will. All the information gathered was treated as confidential. Focus groups were conducted with respect and sensitivity.

8 Results and discussion

Students' discussions in response to the research question "What was your most valuable or enjoyable learning experience?" centred around (1) initial experiences of entering higher education, (2) the learning experiences of the academic facilitation programme that they valued, and (3) the educational outcomes that were reached. We discuss students' accounts of their learning experiences below against the frame of the theoretical perspectives illuminated earlier in this article.

8.1 Entering higher education

A strong theme that emerged from students' descriptions of their experiences during the first year in higher education referred to the challenges they experienced when

entering the higher education milieu. Students articulated feelings of fear, confusion, and helplessness, as well as the experience of being lost in the crowd. Students described classes as being *serious* and the lecturers as very focussed on the content to be covered and not willing to *make a joke or something*.

The theme of being passive learners during the formal lectures was also quite prominent. Various students mentioned: *everybody is quiet and listening to the lecturer; everybody's scared to just raise their hand, no one will ever ask a question*. Students did not feel free to raise opinions: *trying to give an answer and they would be like throwing stones at you and like you know your answer is wrong... and resolved to compose yourself and keep it to yourself, you just sit...* This approach to learning is in opposition to the experiential learning principles of active and reflective engagement in the learning process (Dewey 1897, 1963; Kolb 1984; Kolb and Kolb 2005).

All this contributed to an overall negative learning experience that did not facilitate understanding or learning, as illustrated by student statements such as *you want the class to be over, you know?* and *...we go to class at 10 maybe, then come out at 11, just sitting like that, looking at the slides, not understanding anything, and just leave, without understanding anything...*

Considering the importance of positive emotions in the learning process as proposed by broaden-and-build theorists (Fredrickson 2001; Fredrickson and Branigan 2005; Fredrickson and Joiner 2002) it can be concluded that, in this situation, the opportunity for gains such as a broader scope of thought and action, improved focus and motivation, as well as the building of intellectual, psychological, and social resources, is lost.

The experiences described above correspond with previous international (Kuh et al. 2006) and national (Bojuwoye 2002; Brüssow 2007; Fraser and Killen 2003; Schalkwyk et al. 2009) research findings that highlighted the challenges arising from the gap between students' readiness for and the demands they face in the higher education institution as they encounter it. It furthermore indicates the importance of additional measures to scaffold first-year students in their learning experiences and to provide an enabling environment for engagement in the learning process.

8.2 Discovering the valued experiences in the academic facilitation programme

The responses to the academic facilitation programme stood in direct contrast to students' reports on the mainstream teaching encounter. Students were recalling and discussing the events, activities, and interactions that contributed to their overall experience in the academic facilitation programme. This included themes regarding the learning climate, experiential techniques, as well as interactions with peers and facilitators.

8.2.1 The learning climate in the academic facilitation programme

Describing the academic facilitation contact sessions, students used words such as *entertaining; enthusiastic; motivational; fun*. Students appreciated the emotional aspects of the learning climate. This is in accordance with humanistic ideas prioritizing

not only the cognitive, but also the affective domain of learning (Marquardt and Waddill 2004; Qi 2012; Rogers 1961). With words such as *free* and *human* students indicated that they experienced an opportunity for autonomy. This is in alignment with the control value theory where the use of an autonomy-supportive learning environment is suggested (Dettmers et al. 2011). Autonomy inspires students' natural propensity or eagerness to learn (Rogers 1969, 1983).

Students identified and valued the constructivist climate of the academic facilitation sessions: *even if somebody said something wrong, [the facilitator] tells him in a way that you shouldn't stop trying. It's like there is a wrong answer, but then you should just start again and think of a new idea. It motivated us.* Thus, the focus was not on a definite right or wrong answer, but rather on support and direction towards finding the most appropriate answer. This encouraged students to employ critical and creative thinking strategies and engage with the work. They commented: *if you can take this and this in that direction, and focus more in that direction.* This agrees well with Dewey's naturalistic and constructivist approach where the student finds meaning through the interplay between experience and theory. The value of the learning realized not through instruction in the 'truth' of the topic, but in the opportunity created for students to find their own way to a rational understanding of the matter. It is not information that needs to be applied in future, but skills and actual procedures (Dewey 1897, 1963).

8.2.2 Experiential techniques in the academic facilitation programme

The techniques students highlighted as valuable related to the experiential philosophy of the project. With statements such as *to be more on a live level; making it more practical, ... so you get to realize that, okay, this is how it relates to my life...* students revealed that they had experienced aspects of Kolb's learning cycle (1984), involving the connections between concrete experiences and abstract conceptualizations. A student demonstrated the value of the progression through reflection, action, feeling, and thinking modes (Dewey 1897, 1963; Kolb 1984) by stating:

...we also personalize ...think of ourselves being in a situation and then think of a picture of a grandma or something which makes that simple and then it is more easy to learn it.

Students also commented on the activity-based nature of the sessions. They mentioned how the use of activities assisted them to personalize material, create meaning, and memorize material. The specific activities that students mentioned were: *draw pictures that you have to flaunt and present...; using media and visuals; pictures; colour; mind maps.* The value of active learning was supported in statement such as... *and then you can learn, because your mind is active. You are alert and the information can get in and then it settles.*

Related to the claims made by social learning theorists such as Vygotsky (2004), students referred to the interactive nature of contact sessions—the value of the discussions, asking questions and having to *raise my voice* and *speak up*. A student said: *...you can even ask questions, you can even give an elaboration on the work you are doing.* We elaborate on this aspect in the following section.

8.2.3 Interacting with peers

Many students referred to the benefits of collaborative learning practices, and identified various specific benefits. This accorded with the principles of social learning theories (Belenky et al. 1997; Vygotsky 2004).

Students found reciprocity in the interplay between receiving help at times (...as you make a mistake...maybe the other person next to you in class understands better and it makes it easy) and being able to act as a resource to others at other times (... in small groups, at least I could participate and say: 'Okay, this is how this works...'). They also expressed a sense of their own responsibility to the group (*It has to be a two way thing or a four way thing.*) and of keeping each other accountable (*because someone may just ask: 'Okay, why are you not saying anything?'*).

According to Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, co-constructed learning processes and interpersonal interaction is pivotal in the improvement of learning. Often, social experiences precipitate an intrapersonal or an individual investigation. In Harland's (2003) study of the impact of socio-cultural pedagogies and the use of problem-based approaches, he found that: "Through structured personal enquiry, students could learn to ask questions about their learning and test them against their own experiences, or the accepted wisdom of more experienced peers or tutors" (p. 266). Similarly, group work in the academic facilitation programme provided students with the opportunity to express their ideas freely, to listen to different opinions (*hearing other peoples' point of views, ...people give you ideas. It opened up my mind...*), to compare various opinions, and to create their own opinions. Students also mentioned that participating in class and presenting material to peers built their confidence to articulate their views, even if it differed from those of others. Participants also emphasized that hearing other students' perspectives on theoretical content helped her to test her own constructed meaning and possibly change her understanding of the material:

Okay, this is what I think. And then we'll decide, Okay, among all the suggestions, we think.... Maybe we will all say: 'Okay, we think we should take your idea, because of 1-2-3....

Another student mentioned:

...so it helps me to keep focused in a sense that I am interested in knowing what other people are going to say. So that I should see if what we are saying is making sense ...Maybe something they will come up with, is better than what we were coming up with. Well, maybe what we came up with is better than what they came up with. So it helped me kept my mind wanting....

Learning through people, as the students named it, also facilitated understanding: ... *if you are dealing with something and a second person talks about it and understand it better, it's better for you... While you sit at home and then you think you are right, while you are wrong.* Furthermore, it improved memory: ... *and even if I don't remember what I read, I'll remember I was discussing this with someone and this is what they said...* and facilitated the development of general interpersonal skills: *to deal with people; to handle them; understanding them.*

It was clear that social support is motivational: *...even if you took something negatively and then the other person will help you to see it in a more positive way or whatever and then it will help....*

The study relationships and friendships that formed also extended beyond the classroom. Students mentioned: *...we get used to one another and then we pass we go 'hi, hi,' because of the academic facilitation classes and... now we are friends—it's just like that. It builds and builds and builds and builds.* Students also mentioned the importance of sharing their own experiences (*...Sometimes...you just want to share about your week's experiences...*) and learning from each others' personal experiences (*This is why I failed. And I think the only way you will make it is if you do 1-2-3, because I tried 1-2-3.*). Students also felt more comfortable to ask their peers for advice:

... so that you don't think maybe you are more stupid or something like that, you know. So it helped me to be able to ask other students when I am not clear about something as well. Because I never used to ask other people that kind of thing.

The social cohesion expressed here is thus evidence of the formation of communities of practice (Belenky et al. 1997; Cornelius-White 2007; Fear et al. 2002; Jennings and Di 1996).

8.2.4 Interacting with programme facilitators

Students described the facilitators as *happy; laughing; fun; loving; challenging; and cheering.*

It was clear that in the humanistic and student-centred nature of the academic facilitation programme, facilitators focussed on more than just the academic content, portrayed a true interest in students, and showed a willingness to build strong interpersonal relationships embedded in care, acceptance, and respect. Students mentioned:

... because it wasn't just about 'okay, let's do this work and get it done and over with', because, ja, most of the time some people just do that. 'Just fill in the papers, just copy and paste it', and that didn't help anything after all. So they [the facilitators] were more willing to help.

... they would ask about how are you and stuff like that, so you could say maybe that ... 'I am not feeling well', or 'I didn't write well', or 'This is stressing me', ... they would place that friendly environment ...

I realized that, okay, the facilitators weren't mainly focused on just telling students. They were more interested in building relationships.... So it has made it [a] more comfortable environment whereby they [students] were able to ask anything, anytime about what they couldn't understand.

This echoes Rogers' (1969, 1983) view that successful interpersonal relationships with students are fundamental to learning.

Empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness, all components of a student-centred approach (Rogers 1969, 1983; Cornelius-White 2007) are crucial

elements of a positive learning environment as it facilitates students comfort to be open to learning. This experience of safety with the facilitators provided students with courage: *I shall try if I am wrong, T* is gonna correct me, or I* is going to show me the right path.* The themes of respect and acceptance were quite prominent and regarded as personally beneficial: *you [the facilitator] also gave us a chance to express our feelings, so you gave us respect and it is also something which helped me...* The non-judgmental and accepting climate encouraged students:

I think it encourages us to participate in class and to talk in the free and in the end, you think like, ‘Wow, I did it! So I think it encourages us to speak, and I even think it pushes us to class and just feel confident.

Students also mentioned that the facilitators thought about what it felt like to be in the class as a student. Embedded in the relationship of genuineness, facilitators become real persons and could act as role models for students.

8.3 The educational outcomes that can be reached in a positive emotional climate

[Fredrickson and Joiner \(2002\)](#) emphasized the reciprocal relationship between thought processes, behaviour and emotions. With her broaden-and-build theory, [Fredrickson \(1998, 2001\)](#) also postulated that the experience of positive emotions is likely to broaden the thought processes and actions. The following statements are very apt examples of Fredrickson’s theory in practice:

... contributes to you enjoying your learning experiences ...builds your imagination *and* we are enjoying it and learning more and trying more.

I was able to love it and enjoy it so until I wanted to learn more and acquire knowledge, not just to read the textbook.

... and it makes life interesting and see that it’s not just about writing tests after all, you know.

I think it encourages us to participate in class and to talk in the free and like in the end, you think like, ‘wow, I did it!’. So I think it encourages us to speak, and I even think pushes us to class and just feel confident.

It builds your confidence. It makes you like free enough... it gives you that courage... so that you can raise your point

In the above mentioned and other cases, students reported that positive emotional experiences during academic facilitation sessions resulted in the development of helpful beliefs about their abilities, which in turn motivated certain behaviours: they experienced confidence and the courage to voice their opinions, they became motivated to attend classes and actively participate during sessions.

Students mentioned the avoidance of certain negative emotional reactions during learning experiences (*Because I don’t like going feeling helpless...*) and all the participants emphasized their preference for an environment that promotes emotional expression and elicits positive emotional experiences, such as: *...chance to express*

our feelings; it builds our freedom of expression, and being challenged to try. Consequently, students seemed to favour the unrestricted expression of emotions during contact sessions and feeling enjoyment, fun, relaxed, and free. They reported that these experiences decreased the experience of stress, helplessness, and fear.

...while you are doing it as a fun activity or something, [you] don't even think 'oh, I am learning', you just do it for fun.

... It's fun, it keep you entertained rather than fussing and trying to summarize everything on your own.

... if it is more fun, you feel more relaxed, you stress less.

...then I laugh and I remember, "okay, this was the explanation, this was the picture, this was elaborated with this theory or something". So that then it comes back and I'll say, 'Aaaah, that was that!'

A further consequence is a changed attitude towards the discipline of Psychology. Instead of experiencing boredom students started to enjoy the learning event and *wanted to learn more and acquire knowledge*. A student mentioned:

To be honest, when I was still just attending the lectures, I really had a bad attitude towards Psychology. I just didn't know what is going on. I just didn't understand anything. I was lost and everything.... I thought: 'No. Why should I do this? Why? How does it even help me? Does it even relate to me?' But then in the academic facilitation class, they were making it more practical, so you get to realize that okay, this is how it relates to my life or something".

Thus, the academic facilitation sessions effected a complete reversal in attitude.

9 Conclusions: implications for practice

The aim of this research study was to determine the affective value of students' learning experiences, i.e. to explore how students' experiences of positive affect contributed to behavioural, cognitive, and emotional changes during the learning experience. The application of the facilitation pedagogies in the academic facilitation programme does indeed seem to produce valuable student experiences. These experiences increased personal involvement in learning, broadened thought processes and actions, and resulted in change and development on emotional, cognitive, and behavioural levels. In accordance with the propositions of [Linnenbrink-Garcia et al. \(2011\)](#), students highlighted the dynamic and cyclical relationship between affect and social behavioural engagement.

Through this research we learned and agree with previous researchers that a student-centred approach gives voice to students' experiences ([Cornelius-White 2007](#)). Furthermore, the learning environment is the main vehicle within which an optimal climate of change and learning is created. When students feel secure and supported in their learning environments, they are more open and willing to involve themselves in the learning process. From a social constructivist point of view, the method of knowledge

and skill transfer may be just as important as the actual content being shared. Rogers (1969, p. 104) stated that “The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; ... that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security”. When students’ learning experiences meet their personal needs and moves students in the direction towards what they want to know, learning becomes development (Rogers 1969).

Drawing on the theoretical perspectives discussed above, as well as the voices of students, we regard the following learning principles as important in creating an optimal learning environment:

- A learning environment should create a safe space where students can feel comfortable and confident to move beyond their current levels of knowledge and competence.
- An educational approach should facilitate students’ autonomy and natural propensity for learning.
- Active and direct involvement of students in the learning experiences should be encouraged.
- Learning experiences should be authentic and intrinsically valuable.
- Students should be presented with the opportunity to employ reflection, action, feeling, and thinking.

These principles all underscore the affective value of learning.

This study has various limitations. It only focused on broad affective states and did not capture a finer nuanced and specific analysis of emotion as suggested by Linnenbrink-Garcia and Pekrun (2011). In this study, we made use of self-report measures where students were given the opportunity to provide their own experiences of the learning situation. With researchers such as Nett et al. (2011) and Winne and Nesbit (2010) who attested to the inherent validity of self-report measures, we value the reflections and self-reports of students. Still, researchers in the field also referred to possible self-report biases and the need to supplement self-reports with actual observations and observer-reports (Hill et al. 2013; Linnenbrink-Garcia et al. 2011; Linnenbrink-Garcia and Pekrun 2011). Lastly, Pekrun et al. (2011) were of the opinion that different emotions might be prioritized in different educational settings. This specific educational experience (including female students in a unique facilitation programme in the humanities) might thus not be generalizable in the traditional sense of the word. Still, we believe in the idiographic generalizability (Fairweather and Rinne 2012) of the findings for higher education programmes which has contexts and cultures similar to this study. Furthermore, the measures employed to foster trustworthiness, we believe, ensure the transferability of the findings to a variety of educational settings.

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